

### **Direct Democracy**

"At its best, in the city-state of Athens, the public assembly of all the citizens made all important decisions on such questions as peace or war. They listened to the envoys of foreign powers and decided what their attitude should be to what these foreign powers had sent to say. They dealt with all serious questions of taxation, they appointed the generals who should lead them in time of war. They organized the administration of the state, appointed officials and kept check on them. **The public assembly of all the citizens was the government.**"

**a bewick/ed pamphlet**

# **Every Cook Can Govern**

**A Study of Democracy  
in Ancient Greece  
Its Meaning for Today**

**C.L.R. James**



Second Edition

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victims in their respective tribes and demes, to kill him. Let the oath be as follows: 'I will kill with my own hand, if I am able, any man who shall subvert the democracy at Athens, or who shall hold any office in the future after the democracy has been subverted, or shall rise in arms for the purpose of making himself a despot, or shall help the despot to establish himself. And if any one else shall kill him, I will account the slayer to be holy as respects both gods and demons, as having slain an enemy of the Athenians. And I engage, by word, by deed, and by vote, to sell his property and make over one-half of the proceeds to the slayer, without withholding anything. If any man shall perish in slaying, or in trying to slay the despot, I will be kind both to him and to his children, as to Harmodius and Aristogeiton and their descendants. And I hereby dissolve and release all oaths which have been sworn hostile to the Athenian people, either at Athens, or at the camp (at Samos) or elsewhere.' Let all Athenians swear this as the regular oath immediately before the festival of the Dionysia, with sacrifice and full-grown victims; invoking upon him who keeps it good things in abundance, but upon him who breaks it destruction for himself as well as for his family."

That was the spirit of the men who created and defended the great democracy of Athens. Let all true believers in democracy and equality today strengthen ourselves by studying what they did and how they did it.

# Every Cook Can Govern

## Introduction

Celebrations of the 2,500th anniversary of the creation of a democratic society in ancient Greece took place in 1991. Dignitaries from the various Western democracies attended ceremonies in Greece. The hypocrisy of these celebrations seems obvious in light of the fact that modern parliamentary and congressional democracy is, in many ways, a violation of the principles of direct democracy that were established in ancient Athens and that are examined here in C. L. R. James' thought provoking essay.

What passes for democracy in the modern world is generally held in contempt by the citizens of those very countries which call themselves democracies. In this century, the leading democracies, first and foremost the United States, have been involved in two devastating world wars, the pillage of the peoples of Latin America, Africa and Asia, the support of brutal dictatorships whenever it suited their imperial interests, and so on. At the same time, they have been unable to provide all their citizens with the minimum levels of comfort and culture that a modern technological society is clearly able to produce.

The human race, and the world in which we live, is in a desperate situation. Poverty and unemployment, racism, sexism, and bigotry are endemic in the modern world. Two

centuries of industrialization have wreaked havoc on the environment. People starve, not because there is no food, but because food is distributed only when it can make a profit. Even the wealthiest nations are ridden with debt. Corruption is common in politics and business. Disease, random violence and homelessness are eating the heart out of every major city on Earth. Work, for most people, continues to be drudgery, with fewer and fewer opportunities for creative initiative.

What does the democracy of ancient Greece tell us about the possibility of transforming this history of death and destruction into a human and humane future for all the people of the world?

The organization known as CORRESPONDENCE first published this pamphlet in 1956 to explore this question. Written by C. L. R. James, the West Indian Marxist who founded the organization, it was originally intended to refute the idea that, somehow, a vanguard party of the left might lead us to a better future. The title of the pamphlet is a reference to Lenin's belief that "every cook must learn to govern" and that government should be administered by every person in the state. This goal could not be achieved in Lenin's Russia. When this pamphlet was first published the fundamental conflict in the world appeared to be that between Soviet Communism and American Capitalism. It was the position of CORRESPONDENCE, however, that the Soviet economy was in fact just another form of capitalism—state capitalism. By one of history's strange coincidences, evidence of the conflict that really divides the world appeared in the very year *Every Cook Can Govern* was published.

In October 1956, in the totalitarian Communist dictatorship of Hungary, the people rose up and demonstrated the

some of the wealthy people made attempts to destroy the democratic constitution and institute the rule of the privileged. They had temporary success but were ultimately defeated every time. In the end, the democracy was defeated by a foreign enemy and not from inside. One notable feature of Athenian democracy was that, despite the complete power of the popular assembly, it never attempted to carry out any socialistic doctrines. The democrats taxed the rich heavily and kept them in order, but they seemed to have understood instinctively that their economy, chiefly of peasants and artisans, was unsuitable as the economic basis for a socialized society. They were not idealists or theorists or experimenters, but somber, responsible people who have never been surpassed at the practical business of government.

How shall we end this modest attempt to bring before modern workers the great democrats of Athens? Perhaps by reminding the modern world of the fact that great as were their gifts, the greatest gift they had was their passion for democracy. They fought the Persians, but they fought the internal enemy at home with equal, if not greater determination. Once, when they were engaged in a foreign war, the anti-democrats tried to establish a government of the privileged. The Athenian democrats defeated both enemies, the enemy abroad and the enemy at home. And after the double victory, the popular assembly decreed as follows:

#### Athenian Oath

"If any man subvert the democracy of Athens, or hold any magistracy after the democracy has been subverted, he shall be an enemy of the Athenians. Let him be put to death with impunity, and let his property be confiscated to the public, with the reservation of a tithe to Athena. Let the man who has killed him, and the accomplice privy to the act, be accounted holy and of good religious odor. Let all Athenians swear an oath under the sacrifice of full-grown



in 480, the battle of Salamis, and in 479, the battle of Plataea, in which the whole population fought. Much of this war was fought at sea. Thus, commercially and militarily, Athens became a naval power. But the ships in those days were propelled by the men who rowed them. Thus the rowers in the fleet became a great social force. The Greeks always said that it was the growth of democracy which had inspired the magnificent defense of Greece against Persia. But after that victory was won, the rowers in the fleet became the spear-head of the democracy and they were the ones who forced democracy to its ultimate limits.

### Proletarians of Piraeus

The port of Athens was, as it is to this day, the Piraeus. There, for the most part, lived the sailors of the merchant fleet and the navy and a number of foreigners, as takes place in every great naval port. The leaders in the popular assembly were sometimes radical noblemen and later were often ordinary artisans. But the proletarians of the Piraeus were the driving force and they were the most radical of the democrats.

The struggle was continuous. The battle of Plataea took place in 479 B.C. A quarter of a century later, another revolution took place and power was transferred definitely from the nobles who still retained some of it, to the radical democracy. Pericles, an aristocrat by birth, was one of the leaders of this revolution. Five years after, the lowest classes in the city gained the power of being elected or chosen for the Archonship, a very high post. It was Pericles who began to pay the people for doing political work. From 458, the radical democracy continued until it finally collapsed in 338 B.C.

### Class Struggle

The struggle was continuous. The old aristocratic class and

possibility of a revolutionary direct democracy in the modern world. A large and growing demonstration of students and intellectuals was under way in a major square in Budapest when it was joined by thousands of Hungarian workers. They proceeded to create workers' councils and, within 48 hours, took over control and direction of all the means of production, service and communication in Hungary. The old Communist government was overthrown. The Hungarian people were working their way toward a new kind of society which was neither Communist (as that was understood in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union) nor capitalist. There was nothing in Hungarian society that could withstand their attempt to create a new society.

The revolution was overthrown by the invasion of Soviet tanks. The West, led by the United States, took whatever propaganda advantage that it could from the Soviet oppression, but also took care that the Hungarian Revolution would not spread to other countries. Before 1956, Radio Free Europe and Voice of America had called for East Europeans to revolt. After 1956, that call was never heard again. (While the Soviet Union was crushing the Hungarian Revolution, England, France and Israel invaded Egypt in an attempt to steal the Suez Canal.)

The Hungarian Revolution was direct democracy in action in the modern, industrial world. Workers and others did not act through elected representatives, professional politicians. In the workers councils they acted directly and in concert to assume control of their own lives and their own society. All employees of an establishment met at their workplace as often as everyday to make decisions. Delegates were chosen to carry out decisions or to represent the council at city-wide or regional bodies. All delegates were subject to immediate recall.



In 1968, something very similar happened in France. The entire working class of the country occupied all the factories in France and came within a hair's breadth of overthrowing the DeGaulle government. In the same year, the people of Czechoslovakia attempted to do the same and were crushed by another Soviet invasion. In 1980, after many years of struggle, direct democracy appeared in Poland in the form of Solidarity. (By the Solidarity of 1980 we do not mean Lech Walesa in 1990 trying to sell Polish factories to American capitalists.)

The world has recently seen the destruction of totalitarian dictatorships in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. We need to understand that the first blows to weaken the Soviet Empire were struck by the workers of Eastern Europe and, to some extent, Western Europe. Decades of working class resistance, punctuated by revolutionary attempts to assert direct democracy, made Eastern Europe, and then the Soviet Union, ungovernable. The revolutions in these countries—the attempts to create new societies—have only just begun. China's Tiananmen square, the overthrow of military dictatorships in Africa and the crowds at the Russian legislature during the Moscow coup are well-known examples. Less well-known was the 1989 strike of Soviet coal miners. The strike committees became centers of activity for whole communities. Under the slogan "perestroika from below" these committees began to assume political functions.

Western politicians and journalists would have us believe that these battles and sacrifices were somehow intended to replace totalitarian dictatorship and state capitalism with "free enterprise" and what passes for democracy in our countries. They have tried to use the Eastern European drive for freedom to convince us that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and that the greed, corruption, poverty and violence

moved from the radical democracy, the direct democracy of later years. For at least a century after Solon, the highest positions of the state could only be filled by men who had a qualification of property and this property qualification was usually associated with men of noble birth. The constitution in other words, was somewhat similar to the British constitution in the 18th Century. The real relation of forces can be seen best perhaps in the army. In cities like Athens, the whole able-bodied population was called upon to fight its wars. Political power, when it passed from the aristocracy, remained for some decades in the hands of those who were able to supply themselves with armor and horses.

### Power of Rovers

About 90 years after Solon, there was another great revolution in Athens. It was led by a radical noble, Cleisthenes by name. Cleisthenes instituted a genuinely middle class democracy. As in Western European history, the first stage in democracy is often the constitution. Then later comes the extension of the constitution to the middle classes and the lower middle classes. That was what took place in Greece.

The great masses of the people, however, the rank and file, were excluded from the full enjoyment of democratic rights. The ordinary citizen, the ordinary working man, the ordinary artisan, did not have any of the privileges that he was to have later. The way he gained them is extremely instructive.

The development of commerce gradually transformed Athens first into a commercial city, and then into a city which did a great trade in the Mediterranean and the other lands around it. But a few years after the establishment of this middle class democracy by Cleisthenes, we have the period of the great Persian invasion. In 490 B.C., we have the battle of Marathon,



established a more or less democratic constitution and, for that reason, his name is to this day famous as a man of political wisdom. We see his name in the headlines of newspapers, written by men who we can be pretty sure have little sympathy with what Solon did. But the fact that his name has lasted all these centuries as a symbol of political wisdom is significant of the immense change in human society which he inaugurated. A few years before the end of the 6th Century B.C., we have the real beginning of democracy in the constitution of Solon.

### Solon's Constitution

The citizens of the city-state were not only those who lived in the city, but the peasants who lived around. Solon was supported by the merchants and the urban classes, and also by the peasants. The growth of a money economy and of trade and industry, as usual, had loaded the peasants with debt and Solon cancelled the burden of debt on them. So that in a manner that we can well understand, the growth of industry and trade, and the dislocation of the old peasant economy provided the forces for the establishment of Solon's great constitution. It was the result of a great social upheaval.

To give you some idea of the state of the surrounding world when Solon was introducing his constitution, we may note that 30 years after Solon's constitution, we have the death of Nebuchadnezzar, the king in the Bible who was concerned in that peculiar business of Shadrack, Meshak and Abednego. And this is the answer to all who sneer about the greatness of Greek Democracy. You only have to look at what the rest of the world around them was doing and thinking.

But although Solon's constitution was a great and historic beginning, the democracy that he inaugurated was far re-

of our society are minor aberrations.

In the West, the differences between politicians are minor and cosmetic. Policies, platforms and promises are marketing tools to entice the electorate. The campaign speech has been reduced to the eight second sound bite. To be successful, politicians must lower their horizons to the next election. The goal of political parties is not to exercise power wisely but only to achieve power and maintain it.

These are not new developments. This is how Engels described the situation in the United States at the end of the last century:

"Nowhere do 'politicians' form a more separate and powerful section of the nation than precisely in North America. There, each of the two major parties which alternately succeed each other in power is itself in turn controlled by people who make a business of the politics, who speculate on seats in the legislative assemblies of the Union as well as of the separate states, or who make a living by carrying on agitation for their party and on its victory are rewarded with positions. It is well known the Americans have been trying for thirty years to shake off this yoke, which has become intolerable, and how in spite of it all they continue to sink ever deeper in this swamp of corruption. It is precisely in America that we see best how there takes place this process of the state power making itself independent in relation to society, whose mere instrument it was originally intended to be. Here there exists no dynasty, no nobility, no standing army, beyond the few men keeping watch on the Indians, no bureaucracy with permanent posts or the right to pensions. And nevertheless we find here two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends—and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality dominate and plunder it."\*

\*Frederick Engels, *Introduction to The Civil War in France* by Karl Marx, on the 20th anniversary of the *Paris Commune*, March 18, 1891.



These flaws in representative democracies are still well known to their peoples. The popular attitude towards politicians is anger and contempt.

In Canada clumsy and secretive attempts by the federal and provincial governments to amend the constitution have led to demands for a constituent assembly composed of non-politicians as well as referenda to ratify any changes. In the United States, where half the eligible population refuse to even take part in the charade of the electoral system, disgust with incumbents has sparked proposals to limit the number of terms that federal and state legislators can serve.

While not the direct democracy of the Hungarian Revolution or ancient Greece, these developments show a growing desire to get away from government by professional politicians, which is what representative democracy is.

We do not want to suggest that the democracy of ancient Greece was perfect or that it can easily be copied in the modern world. Greece was burdened by the dual crimes of slavery and the inferior status of women, as were all ancient societies in the Mediterranean basin and in Asia. What distinguished ancient Athens was that, in that society, human beings began to break out and to produce new forms of self-government. That they could not solve all of the evils of that time should not be surprising.

How useful is this example for the huge, industrial societies of today? One of the things which Greece had, to a significant extent, was a sense of community. In our world, that is substantially absent. How do we envision the possibility of a new, free, cooperative society while we are enmeshed in one that is driven by greed and bigotry? The answer does not lie in electing a new set of legislators, or a different

the radical democracy was the best type of government for Athens. Many intellectuals today do not do as well. They not only support but they join bureaucratic and even sometimes totalitarian forms of government.

The intellectuals who through the centuries preoccupied themselves with Plato and his speculations undoubtedly had a certain justification for so doing. Today there is none. What all should study first is the way in which the Greeks translated into active concrete life their conception of human equality. The Greeks did not arrive at their democracy by reading the books of philosophers. The common people won it only after generations of struggle.

### **How the Democracy Was Won**

It would seem that somewhere between 650 and 600 B.C., the first great stage in the development of Greek Democracy was reached when the laws were written down. The people fought very hard that the law should be written so that everyone should know what it was by which he was governed.

But this was not accidental. As always, what changed the political situation in Greece were changes in the social structure. Commerce and (to a degree more than most people at one time believed) industry; the use of money, played great roles in breaking down aristocratic distinctions, and over the years, there was a great social levelling, social equality, due to the growth of merchant and trading classes, to the increase of the artisan class, of workmen in small factories and sailors on the ships. With these changes in Greek society, the merchants made a bid for power in the manner that we have seen so often in recent centuries in European history and also in the history of Oriental countries. Solon was the statesman who first



of modern enemies of direct democracy and even of some learned Greek scholars. It is false to the core. And the proof is that the greatest intellectuals of the day, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others (men of genius such as the world has rarely seen), were all bitterly opposed to the democracy. To them, this government by the common people was wrong in principle and they criticized it constantly. More than that, Plato spent the greater part of his long life discussing and devising and publishing ways and means of creating forms of society, government and lay which would be superior to the Greek Democracy. And yet, Plato owed everything to the democracy.

He could think and discuss and publish freely solely because he lived in a democracy. We should remember too that the very ideas of what could constitute the perfect society he was always seeking, came to him and could come to him only because the democracy in Greece was itself constantly seeking to develop practically the best possible society. It is true that Plato and his circle developed theories and ideas about government and society which have been of permanent value to all who have worked theoretically at the problems of society ever since. Their work has become part of the common heritage of Western Civilization.

But we make a colossal mistake if we believe that all this is past history. For Plato's best known book, *The Republic*, is his description of an ideal society to replace the democracy, and it is a perfect example of a totalitarian state, governed by an elite. And what is worse, Plato started and brilliantly expounded a practice which has lasted to this day among intellectuals—a constant speculation about different and possible methods of government, all based on a refusal to accept the fact that the common man can actually govern. It must be said for Plato that, in the end, he came to the conclusion that

political party to replace the discredited old ones. The answer lies in seeing in the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the French Revolt of 1968, the Polish Solidarity of 1980, the modern forms of the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

The answer lies in ending the separation of economics and politics. It involves people taking control of their workplaces, their neighborhoods, their communities—directly and without mediators. Without bureaucrats, capitalists and managers standing in the way, it should be possible to build a sense of community, of unity, of cooperation. This will obviously provoke tremendous opposition. Hungarian, French and Polish workers confronted the economic, political and military might of their societies. Either we will find the strength and will to do the same or we will sink further into the decay that is now destroying us.

— June, 1992



## Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece Its Meaning for Today

by  
C. L. R. James

### Direct Democracy

The Greek form of government was the city-state. Every Greek city was an independent state. At its best, in the city-state of Athens, the public assembly of all the citizens made all important decisions on such questions as peace or war. They listened to the envoys of foreign powers and decided what their attitude should be to what these foreign powers had sent to say. They dealt with all serious questions of taxation, they appointed the generals who should lead them in time of war. They organized the administration of the state, appointed officials and kept check on them. The public assembly of all the citizens was the government.

Perhaps the most striking thing about Greek Democracy was that the administration (and there were immense administrative problems) was organized upon the basis of what is known as sortition, or, more easily, selection by lot. The vast majority of Greek officials were chosen by a method which amounted to putting names into a hat and appointing the ones whose names came out.

Now the average CIO bureaucrat or Labor Member of Parliament in Britain would fall in a fit if it was suggested to him that any worker selected at random could do the work that

the men who were appointed as generals. Pericles ruled Athens as general in command for some 30 years. But although he ruled, he was no dictator. He was constantly re-elected. On one occasion, he was tried before the courts but won a victory. On another occasion, Aspasia, the woman with whom he lived, was brought before the court by his enemies. Pericles defended her himself. He was a man famous for his gravity of deportment, but on this occasion, Aspasia was so hard pressed that he broke down and cried. The jury was so astonished at seeing this, that it played an important role in the acquittal of Aspasia. Can you imagine this happening to a modern ruler? Whether democratic or otherwise?

The Greek populace elected Pericles year after year because they knew that he was honest and capable. But he knew and they knew that if they were not satisfied with him, they were going to throw him out. That was the temper of the Greek Democracy in its best days.

This democracy was not established overnight. The early Greek cities were not governed in this way. The landed aristocracy dominated the economy and held all the important positions of government. For example, rich and powerful noblemen, for centuries, controlled a body known as the Areopagus and the Areopagus held all the powers which later were transferred to the council. The magistrates in the courts were a similar body of aristocrats who functioned from above with enormous powers such as modern magistrates and modern judges have. The Greek Democracy had had experience of expert and bureaucratic government.

It was not that the Greeks had such simple problems that they could work out simple solutions or types of solutions which are impossible in our more complicated civilizations. That is the great argument which comes very glibly to the lips



always had and still has many enemies. But the position we take here is based not only on the soundest authorities, but on something far more important, our own belief in the creative power of freedom and the capacity of the ordinary man to govern. Unless you share that belief of the ancient Greeks, you cannot understand the civilization they built.

History is a living thing. It is not a body of facts. We today who are faced with the inability of representative government and parliamentary democracy to handle effectively the urgent problems of the day, we can study and understand Greek Democracy in a way that was impossible for a man who lived in 1900, when representative government and parliamentary democracy seemed securely established for all time.

Take this question of election by lot and rotation so that all could take their turn to govern. The Greeks, or to be more strict, the Athenians (although many other cities followed Athens), knew very well that it was necessary to elect specially qualified men for certain posts. The commanders of the army and of the fleet were specially selected, and they were selected for their military knowledge and capacity. And yet that by itself can be easily misunderstood. The essence of the matter is that the generals were so surrounded by the general democratic practices of the Greeks, the ordinary Greek was so vigilant against what he called "tyranny," that it was impossible for generals to use their positions as they might have been able to do in an ordinary bureaucratic or representative form of government.

### Pericles Cries

So it was that the Greeks, highly sophisticated in the practice of democracy, did not, for example, constantly change

he is doing, but that was precisely the guiding principle of Greek Democracy. And this form of government is the government under which flourished the greatest civilization the world has ever known.

Modern parliamentary democracy elects representatives and these representatives constitute the government. Before the democracy came into power, the Greeks had been governed by various forms of government, including government by representatives. The democracy knew representative government and rejected it. It refused to believe that the ordinary citizen was not able to perform practically all the business of government. Not only did the public assembly of all the citizens keep all the important decisions in its own hands. For the Greek, the word *isonomia*, which meant equality, was used interchangeably for democracy. For the Greek, the two meant the same thing. For the Greek, a man who did not take part in politics was an *idiot*, an idiot, from which we get our modern word idiot, whose meaning, however, we have limited. Not only did the Greeks choose all officials by lot, they limited their time of service. When a man had served once, as a general rule, he was excluded from serving again because the Greeks believed in rotation, everybody taking his turn to administer the state.

### Intellectuals

Intellectuals like Plato and Aristotle detested the system. And Socrates thought that government should be by experts and not by the common people. For centuries, philosophers and political writers, bewildered by these Greeks who when they said equality meant it, have either abused this democracy or tried to explain that this direct democracy was suitable only for the city-state. Large modern communities, they say, are unsuitable for such a form of government.



We of CORRESPONDENCE believe that the larger the modern community, the more imperative it is for it to govern itself by the principle of direct democracy (it need not be a mere copy of the Greek). Otherwise we face a vast and ever-growing bureaucracy. That is why a study, however brief, of the constitution and governmental procedures of Greek Democracy is so important for us today.

Let us see how Greek Democracy administered justice.

The Greek cities for a time had special magistrates and judges of a special type, like those that we have today. When the democracy came into power, about the middle of the 5th Century B.C., there began and rapidly developed a total reorganization of the system of justice. The quorum for important sessions of the assembly was supposed to be 6,000. The Greek Democracy therefore at the beginning of each year, chose by lot 12 groups of 500 each. These 500 tried the cases and their decisions were final.

The Greek Democracy made the magistrate or the judge into a mere clerk of the court. He took the preliminary information and he presided as an official during the case. But his position as presiding officer was merely formal. The jury did not, as in our courts today, decide only on the facts and look to him for information on the law. They decided on the law as well as on the facts. Litigants pleaded their own case, though a litigant could go to a man learned in the law, get him to write a speech and read it himself. The Greeks were great believers in law, both written and unwritten. But the democrats believed not only in the theory of law, but in the principles of equity and we can define equity as what would seem right in a given case in the minds of 500 citizens chosen by lot from among the Athenian population.

understood what his position was and the position of his fellow men in a manner far beyond that of all other peoples who have succeeded him.

### **Working Politics**

In strict politics the great strength of the system was that the masses of the people were paid for the political work that they did. Politics, therefore, was not the activity of your spare time, nor the activity of experts paid specially to do it. And there is no question that in the socialist society the politics, for example, of the workers' organizations and the politics of the state will be looked upon as the Greeks looked upon it, a necessary and important part of work, a part of the working day. A simple change like that would revolutionize contemporary politics overnight.

The great weakness of the system was that, as time went on, the proletariat did little except politics. The modern community lives at the expense of the proletariat. The proletariat in Greece and still more in Rome lived at the expense of the community. In the end, this was a contributory part of the decline of the system. But the system lasted nearly 200 years. The Empires of France and Britain have not lasted very much longer. And America's role as a leader of world civilization is mortally challenged even before it has well begun.

### **The Greeks Were a Sophisticated People**

It is obvious that we can give here no more than a general account of Greek Democracy. There are great gaps in our knowledge of many aspects of Greek life; and even the facts that scholars have patiently and carefully verified during centuries can be, and are, very variously interpreted. There is room for differences of opinion, and Greek Democracy has



Another great advantage of the Greek democrat was that he had a religion. The Greek religion may seem absurd to us today, but any serious study of it will show that it was as great an example of their genius as their other achievements. Religion is that total conception of the universe and man's place in it without which a man or a body of men are like people wandering in the wilderness. And the religious ideas of a people are usually a reflection and development of their responses to the society in which they live. Modern man does not know what to think of the chaotic world in which he lives and that is why he has no religion.

So simple and easy to grasp in all its relations was the city-state that the total conception with which the Greeks conceived of the universe as a whole and man's relation to it was extremely simple and, despite the fact that it was crammed with absurdities, was extremely rational. The Greek gods were essentially human beings of a superior kind. The Greeks placed them on top of a mountain (Olympus) and allowed them their superiority up there. But if any citizen looked as if he was becoming too powerful and might establish himself like a god in Athens, the Athenian Democracy handled him very easily. They held a form of referendum on him and if citizens voted against him, he was forthwith banished for ten years, though when he returned, he could get back his property. Gods were strictly for Olympus.

Around all religions there is great mystery and psychological and traditional associations which are extremely difficult to unravel. But, although the Greek no doubt recognized these mysteries, his relation to them was never such as to overwhelm him.

Thus in his relation to the state, and in his relation to matters beyond those which he could himself handle, he

## No Experts

He would be a very bold man who would say that that system of justice was in any way inferior to the modern monstrosities by which lawyers mulct the public, cases last interminably, going from court to court, and matters of grave importance are decided by the position of full stops and commas (or the absence of them) in long and complicated laws and regulations which sometimes have to be traced through hundreds of years and hundreds of law books. When the Russian Revolution took place and was in its heroic period, the Bolsheviks experimented with People's Courts. But they were timid and in any case, none of these experiments lasted for very long. The essence of the Greek method, here as elsewhere, was the refusal to hand over these things to experts, but to trust to the intelligence and sense of justice of the population at large, which meant of course a majority of the common people.

## The Organization of Government

We must get rid of the idea that there was anything primitive in the organization of the government of Athens. On the contrary, it was a miracle of democratic procedure which would be beyond the capacity of any modern body of politicians and lawyers, simply because these believe that when every man has a vote, equality is thereby established. The assembly appointed a council of 500 to be responsible for the administration of the city and the carrying out of decisions.

But the council was governed by the same principle of equality. The city was divided into 10 divisions and the year was divided into 10 periods. Each section of the city selected by lot 50 men to serve on the council. All the councillors of each section held office for one tenth of the year. So that 50



people were always in charge of the administration. The order in which the group of 50 councillors from each section of the city should serve was determined by lot. Every day, the 50 who were serving chose someone to preside over them and he also was chosen by lot. If on the day that he was presiding, the full assembly of all the citizens met, he presided at the assembly.

The council had a secretary and he was elected. But he was elected only for the duration of one tenth of the year. And (no doubt to prevent bureaucracy) he was elected not from among the 50, but from among the 450 members of the council who were not serving at the time.

When members had served on the council, they were forbidden to serve a second time. Thus every person had a chance to serve. And here we come to one of the great benefits of the system. After a number of years, practically every citizen had had an opportunity to be a member of the administration. So that the body of citizens who formed the public assembly consisted of men who were familiar with the business of government.

No business could be brought before the assembly except it had been previously prepared and organized by the council.

When decisions had been taken, the carrying out of them was entrusted to the council.

The council supervised all the magistrates and any work that had been given to a private citizen to do.

The Greeks had very few permanent functionaries. They preferred to appoint special boards of private citizens. Each of these boards had its own very carefully defined sphere of

Pericles shows us that freedom, the freedom to do and think as you please, not only in politics but in private life, was the very life-blood of the Greeks. In that same speech, he says:

"And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.

"We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break."

### Human "Gods"

Those simple words need hard thinking for us to begin to understand them today. The United States is notorious among modern nations for the brutality with which majorities, in large things as in small, terrorize and bully minorities which do not conform; in Great Britain, the conception of "good form" and "what is not done" exercises a less blatant but equally pervasive influence. The Greek democrat would have considered such attitudes as suitable only for barbarians. One reason why the Greeks so hated the Persians was that a Persian had to bow down and humble himself before the Persian King—the Greek called this "a prostration" and this too he thought was only fit for barbarians. Instead, in the midst of a terrible war, he went to the theatre (which was a state-theatre) and applauded a bitterly anti-war play by Aristophanes, and on another occasion, when the ruler of Athens, accompanied by foreign dignitaries, attended the theatre in his official capacity, Aristophanes ridiculed him so mercilessly in the play that he sued the dramatist—and lost the case.



of labors, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions he performs are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers."

Here is how Pericles, one of the greatest statesmen of the Greek Democracy, described the ordinary Greek citizen:

"Taking everything together then, I declare that our city is an education to Greece, and I declare that in my opinion each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility."

Marx and all the men who have written of a society of democracy and equality had to place it in the future. For our Greek, this conception of the citizen was not an aspiration. It was a fact. The statement occurs in perhaps the greatest of all the Greek statements on democracy, the speech of Pericles on the occasion of a funeral of Athenians who had died in war.

The Greek democrat achieved this extraordinary force and versatility because he had two great advantages over the modern democrat. The first was that in the best days of the democracy, he did not understand individualism as we know it. For him an individual was unthinkable except in the city-state. The city-state of democracy was unthinkable except as a collection of free individuals. He could not see himself or other people as individuals in opposition to the city-state. That came later when the democracy declined. It was this perfect balance, instinctive and unconscious, between the individual and the city-state which gave him the enormous force and the enormous freedom of his personality.

work. The coordination of all these various spheres of work was carried out by the council. A great number of special commissions helped to carry out the executive work. For example, there were 10 members of a commission to see after naval affairs, and 10 members of a commission to hear complaints against magistrates at the end of their term. One very interesting commission was the commission for the conduct of religious ceremonies. The Greeks were a very religious people. But most of the priests and officials of the temples were elected and were for the most part private citizens. The Greeks would not have any bunch of Bishops, Archbishops, Popes and other religious bureaucrats who lived by organizing religion. Some of these commissions were elected from the council. But others again were appointed by lot.

At every turn we see the extraordinary confidence that these people had in the ability of the ordinary person, the grocer, the candlestick maker, the carpenter, the sailor, the tailor. Whatever the trade of the individual, whatever his education, he was chosen by lot to do the work the state required.

And yet they stood no nonsense. If a private individual made propositions in the assembly which the assembly considered frivolous or stupid, the punishment was severe.

### Democratic Drama

Here is some idea of the extent to which the Greeks believed in democracy and equality. One of the greatest festivals in Greece, or rather in Athens, was the festival of Dionysus, the climax of which was the performance of plays for four days, from sunrise to evening. The whole population came out to listen. Officials chose the different playwrights



who were to compete. On the day of the performance, the plays were performed and, as far as we can gather, the prizes were at first given by popular applause and the popular vote. You must remember that the dramatic companies used to rehearse for one year and the successful tragedians were looked upon as some of the greatest men in the state, receiving immense honor and homage from their fellow citizens. Yet it was the public, the general public, of 15 or 20 thousand people that came and decided who was the winner.

Later, a committee was appointed to decide. Today such a committee would consist of professors, successful writers and critics. Not among the Greeks. The committee consisted first of a certain number of men chosen by lot from each section of the city. These men got together and chose by lot from among themselves 10 men. These 10 men attended as the judges. At the end of the performances, they made their decision. The 10 decisions were placed in the hat. Five were drawn out. And the one who had the highest vote from among these five received the prize. But even that does not give a true picture of the attitude of the Greeks towards democracy.

Despite the appointment of this commission, there is evidence that the spectators had a preponderant influence on the judges. The Greek populace behaved at these dramatic competitions as a modern crowd behaves at some football or baseball game. They were violent partisans. They stamped and shouted and showed their likes and dislikes in those and similar ways. We are told that the judges took good care to notice the way in which popular opinion went. Because, and this is typical of the whole working of the democracy on the day after the decision, the law allowed dissatisfied citizens to impeach the members of the commission for unsatisfactory decisions. So that the members of the commission (we can say at least) were very much aware of the consequences of

died times or more of the economic resources of a city like Athens in its greatest days. Furthermore, for a great part of its existence, the total citizen population of Athens could be contained in Ebbets Field or at any of a dozen football grounds in England. This will give you some faint idea of the incredible achievements not of ancient Greece in general, but of Greek Democracy. For it was the democracy of Greece that created these world-historical achievements and they could not have been created without the democracy.

Greece did not only produce great artists, philosophers and statesmen at a time when their work laid the foundation of what we know as civilization. The Greeks fought and won some of the greatest battles that were ever fought in defense of Western Civilization. At the battles of Marathon, Plataea and Salamis, a few thousand Greeks, with the Athenian democrats at their head, defended the beginnings of democracy, freedom of association, etc., against the hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the Oriental despotic monarchy of Persia. In those battles in the 5th Century, Oriental barbarism, which aimed at the destruction of the Greeks, was defeated and hurled back by the Greeks fighting against odds at times of over 20 to 1. The Oriental despots knew very well what they were doing. They came determined to crush the free and independent states of Greece. Never before and never since was so much owed by so many to so few, and as the years go by the consciousness of that debt can only increase.

### **Athenian Democrat - What Kind of Man?**

This has always been an important question but at the stage of society that we have reached, it is the fundamental question: What kind of a man was this Greek democrat? Karl Marx has stated that the future type of man, the man of a socialist society, will be a "fully developed individual, fit for a variety



mathematics, etc.—these men are still to this day unsurpassed as practitioners of the things that they invented or discovered. If you were writing a history of modern civilization, you might find it necessary to bring in perhaps half a dozen Americans. Let us be liberal. A dozen. You will be equally in difficulty to find a dozen Englishmen. But in any such history of Western Civilization, you would have to mention some 60 or 80 Greeks.

Here are some of the names. Epic poetry—Homer. Dramatic poetry—Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Comedy—Aristophanes. Lyric poetry—Pindar and Sappho. Statesmen—Solon, Themistocles and Pericles. Sculpture—The Master of Olympia and Phidias. Oratory—Demosthenes. History—Thucydides and Herodotus. Philosophy—Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. Science and mathematics—Pythagoras and Archimedes. Medicine—Hippocrates.

These are only some of the best known names. And the fact which should never be forgotten and which indeed we should make the foundation of all our thinking on Greece is that by far the greatest number of them lived, and their finest work was done, in the days when the Greek Democracy flourished.

### Modern Comparison

This is the greatest lesson of the Athenian democracy for us today. It was in the days when every citizen could and did govern equally with any other citizen, when in other words, equality was carried to its extreme, that the city produced the most varied, comprehensive and brilliant body of geniuses that the world has ever known. The United States today has a population of 155 million people. In other words, 1500 times the population of Athens. In economic wealth, any two-by-four modern city of 20,000 people probably contains a hun-

disregarding the popular feeling about the plays.

Yet it was the Greeks who invented playwrighting. In Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, they produced three tragedians who, to this day, have no equals as practitioners of the art which they invented. Aristophanes has never been surpassed as a writer of comic plays. These men obviously knew that to win the prize, they had to please the populace. Plato, the great philosopher, was, as can easily be imagined, extremely hostile to this method of decision. But the Greek populace gave the prize to Aeschylus 13 times. They were the ones who repeatedly crowned Aeschylus and Sophocles, and later Euripides, as prize winners. It is impossible to see how a jury consisting of Plato and his philosopher friends could have done any better. There you have a perfect example of the Greek attitude to the capacities, judgment and ability to represent the whole body of citizens, which they thought existed in every single citizen.

### Slavery and Women

There are many people today and some of them radicals and revolutionaries who sneer at the fact that this democracy was based on slavery. So it was, though we have found that those who are prone to attack Greek Democracy on behalf of slavery are not so much interested in defending the slaves as they are in attacking the democracy. Frederick Engels in his book on the family makes an analysis of slavery in relation to Greek Democracy and modern scholars on the whole agree with him. In the early days, Greek slavery did not occupy a very prominent place in the social life and economy of Greece. The slave was for the most part a household slave. Later, the slaves grew in number until they were at least as many as the number of citizens.



In later years, slavery developed to such a degree, with the development of commerce, industry, etc., that it degraded free labor. And it is to this extraordinary growth of slavery and the consequent degradation of free labor that Engels attributes the decline of the great Greek Democracy.\*

However, it is necessary to say this. In the best days of the democracy, there were many slaves who, although denied the rights of citizenship, lived the life of the ordinary Greek citizen. There is much evidence of that. One of the most important pieces of evidence is the complaint of Plato that it was impossible to tell a slave to go off the pavement to make way for a free citizen (especially so distinguished a citizen as Plato) for the simple reason that they dressed so much like the ordinary citizen that it was impossible to tell who was a citizen and who was a slave. In fact, Plato so hated Greek Democracy that he complained that even the horses and the asses in the streets walked about as if they also had been granted liberty and freedom. Near the end of the period of radical democracy, Demosthenes, the greatest of Athenian orators, said that the Athenians insisted on a certain code of behavior towards the slaves, not because of the slaves, but because a man who behaved in an unseemly manner to another human being was not fit to be a citizen. There were horrible conditions among the slaves who worked in the mines. But on the whole, the slave code in Athens has been described by competent authorities as the most enlightened the world has known.

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\*This conventional view on the role of slavery in classical Greece has been challenged in recent years. Ellen Meiksins Wood, in her excellent book *Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy*, Verso, London, 1988 argues that the domination of agriculture by free peasants limited the growth and influence of slavery.

It was also stated by many that the position of women in Athens during the democracy was very bad. Naturally in these days, they did not have the vote. But for many centuries we were taught that the women of the Greek Democracy were little better than bearers of children and housekeepers for their husbands. Yet some modern writers, on closer examination of the evidence, have challenged the old view, and we believe that before very long, the world will have a more balanced view of how women lived in the Greek Democracy.

### The Founders of Western Culture

Now if the ancient Greeks had done little beside invent and practice this unique form of human equality in government, they would have done enough to be remembered. The astonishing thing is that they laid the intellectual foundation of Western Europe. Today when we speak about philosophy, logic, dialect; when we speak of politics, democracy, oligarchy, constitution, law; when we speak of oratory, rhetoric, ethics; when we speak of drama, of tragedy and comedy; when we speak of history; when we speak of sculpture and architecture; in all these things we use the terms and build on the foundations that were discovered and developed by the Greeks.

CORRESPONDENCE is not sure about science, but in every other sphere of human endeavor, whatever the methods, routines, procedures, etc. that are used by people in intellectual and political association with each other, these were discovered, invented, classified and analyzed by the people of ancient Greece.

They not only invented or discovered these things. The men who invented and discovered and developed them—sculpture, politics, philosophy, art and literature, medicine,